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PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KCRM SY

SUBJECT: SARG NERVOUS OVER BRAMMERTZ, DESPITE POSITIVE BODY LANGUAGE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Despite its continuing efforts to project calm, the mid-March Brammertz report seems to have provoked SARG anxiety about where the UNIIIC investigation is headed. A range of contacts report that the regime's guardedly positive public reaction to the mid-march UNIIIC report soured almost immediately into private worries about potential danger areas the report hinted at. Some contacts believe that Brammertz may be leaning towards accusing President Bashar al-Assad of complicity in the killing of former Lebanese PM Rafik al-Hariri. Former VP Abdul Halim Khaddam's ongoing efforts to attack and organize opposition to the regime have also worried SARG leaders. While a few contacts continue to minimize any potential risk to the regime posed by Brammertz or Khaddam, regime uncertainty about their intentions, as well as their capacity to inflict damage, seem to be the factors provoking the most anxiety.  
End Summary.

¶2. (C) The SARG is nervous about where UNIIIC chief Serge Brammertz is headed with the investigation into the assassination of former PM Hariri, despite its sustained efforts over the past six weeks to paint an image of confidence and cooperation. Most contacts believe SARG officials when they insist that relations with Brammertz are much better than they were with Mehlis. They also take at face value initial SARG reaction describing Brammertz's report as careful and professional and highlighting the fact that the Syria is cooperating with the investigation. Beyond that, there was little official reaction and only muted private response to the release of the report.

¶3. (C) Beneath that relatively placid surface, however, substantial anxiety has apparently developed. The initial view that the report was "weak, like the second Mehlis report," has faded. Syrian foreign policy expert Dr. Imad Shueibi, who consults regularly with high-level regime figures, told Polchief that the SARG "cannot relax" because the March interim report, as is clear from a careful second reading, is full of potential pitfalls. He and others who know the regime well express fears that the June report could be much more "aggressive," with Brammertz even moving to include accusations that President Asad was involved in ordering the killing of Hariri. Shueibi expressed the conviction that the Russians would provide some protection at the UNSC if the case moved in this direction. (Note: Shueibi said the Brammertz had asked to meet with him in the coming days, to be briefed on past relations between the Syrian security services and the Lebanese. He cited the

request to demonstrate that Brammertz seemed legitimately interested in investigating the incident and its background, rather than "merely making accusations like Mehlis.")

¶14. (C) MP Basil Dahdouh offered one explanation for the apparent SARG anxiety, noting that the SARG feared the formation of an international tribunal and did not want to "appear silly" praising Brammertz in advance of such a credibility-damaging development. Other contacts thought the shift denoted a more significant swing in regime opinion, pointing to several factors that have concerned SARG officials: Brammertz did not "annul" any of the conclusions that Mehlis reached in his reports; he included a warning indicating that Syrian commitments to cooperate would be tested in the near future; he mentioned the possibility of two explosions, instead of one; and he referred to possible new lines of inquiry for the investigation.

¶15. (C) Opposition figures concurred that the regime is extremely nervous about Brammertz, but is trying to convey the opposite impression. "Bashar says he is relaxed. But he is lying," said senior opposition figure Riad Turk. He thought the regime was most nervous because Brammertz had "not revealed his hand," and because he had cornered top regime officials into pledging to cooperate. Turk repeated his previous prediction that in the end Asad will not agree to be questioned by Brammertz because the Syrian leader "is the killer, he ordered it, and he is trying to escape being accused of the crime."

¶16. (C) Other opposition figures agreed about regime nervousness, saying that state of mind helped explain why the SARG in the past month had cracked down so hard on opposition and civil society activists. They also expressed satisfaction with Brammertz's report. Opposition intellectual Michel Kilo insisted to PolChief that Brammertz would accuse Asad in June of issuing the order that Hariri be killed. He also noted that after an initially positive impression of Brammertz, the regime had become worried and begun to quietly spread rumors that he "is a second Mehlis" and not as objective as he is trying to appear.

¶17. (C) COMMENT: The coincidence of the Brammertz interim report and Khaddam's continuing criticism of the regime have combined to provoke the current unease the regime is experiencing. While a few contacts continue to minimize any potential risk to the regime posed by Brammertz or Khaddam, regime uncertainty about their intentions, as well as their real capacity for inflicting damage, seem to be the factors provoking the most anxiety. After a two-month period of successfully projecting calm and even a sense of momentary satisfaction with its short-term foreign policy triumphs and internal successes at stabilizing the currency and suppressing any wayward signs of dissent or regime stress, the SARG seems now to sense that rougher waters and trickier currents may be on the horizon. As it battens down the hatches, it is becoming more difficult for it to project convincingly an air of calm. Developments with Brammertz and Khaddam in the next few months will make clear to the regime whether the current worries are justified or another false alarm.

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